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REPORT OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL CONCERNING THE SITUATION IN ABKHAZIA, GEORGIA

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to resolution 1187 (1998) of 30 July 1998, by which the Security Council decided to extend the mandate of the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) until 31 January 1999 and requested me to report three months after the date of the adoption of the resolution on the situation in Abkhazia, Georgia, including on the operations of UNOMIG. In compliance with that request, I submitted a report to the Security Council on 29 October 1998 (see S/1998/1012). The present report provides an update of the situation as of 15 January 1999.

2. UNOMIG continues to be headed by my Special Representative for Georgia, Liviu Bota. He is assisted by the Chief Military Observer, Major General Tariq Waseem Ghazi (Pakistan), who succeeded Major General Harun-Ar-Rashid (Bangladesh) on 15 November 1998. The strength of UNOMIG, as of 15 January 1999, stood at 102 military observers (see annex).

II. POLITICAL ASPECTS

3. Following the Athens meeting of the Georgian and Abkhaz sides on confidence-building measures, held from 16 to 18 October 1998, the largest and most representative meeting between the parties since the end of the war of 1993 (see S/1998/1012, paras. 10-12), my Special Representative continued to meet frequently with the two sides and others concerned. In their negotiations, the sides focused on reaching an agreement on security and the non-use of force; the return of refugees and displaced persons to the Gali district; and measures for the economic rehabilitation of Abkhazia.

4. While the above-mentioned efforts were under way, my Special Representative was actively engaged in consultations with the President of Georgia, Eduard Shevardnadze, the Abkhaz leader, Vladislav Ardzinba, and other prominent political figures in Georgia. Each leader continued to express willingness to meet with the other to talk about current problems and to explore possible steps to facilitate a settlement of the conflict.

5. During the reporting period, bilateral contacts between the two sides included visits to Tbilisi, on 29 October and 22 November 1998, by the personal representative of Mr. Ardzinba to the peace process, Anri Jergenia, accompanied by the Abkhaz de facto Deputy Defence Minister, Major General Givi Agrba, for talks with the Georgian State Minister, Vazha Lordkipanidze. The Executive Secretary of the Bilateral Joint Coordination Commission, Zurab Lakerbaia, also facilitated communication between the sides.

6. The group of Friends of the Secretary-General (France, Germany, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the United States of America), actively supported the peace process. The heads of their diplomatic missions in Tbilisi carried out a number of consultations on this matter, including meetings with Mr. Ardzinba on 2 December and President Shevardnadze on 10 December 1998. In addition, the United States announced its readiness to gradually allocate up to $15 million for the rehabilitation of the infrastructure of Abkhazia, Georgia, primarily in the Gali district, if substantial progress in the peace process was achieved.

7. By early November 1998, it appeared that the parties were very close to reaching agreement on two draft documents addressing the three issues mentioned in paragraph 3 above, and it was anticipated that the documents would be signed at a meeting between President Shevardnadze and Mr. Ardzinba. Tentative dates and possible venues for this meeting were discussed. However, the talks suddenly and unexpectedly broke down, reportedly over misunderstandings, and the Abkhaz side stated that it would no longer engage in direct contacts with the Georgian side. The stalemate in the peace talks was accompanied by a sudden and rapid deterioration of the security situation in the zone of conflict. Together, these developments led to the real danger of an outbreak of hostilities similar to that which had taken place in May in the Gali district. In order to prevent such an occurrence and to resume the peace talks, my Special Representative decided urgently to convene the sixth session of the Coordinating Council of the Georgian and Abkhaz sides. The meeting, which was held from 17 to 18 December 1998, took place, exceptionally, at Geneva, as the Abkhaz side refused to travel to Tbilisi where it was supposed to have taken place.

8. The sixth session of the Coordinating Council was held under the chairmanship of my Special Representative and with the participation of representatives of both sides, the Russian Federation in its capacity as facilitator, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the States belonging to the group of Friends of the Secretary-General. The Georgian delegation was led by the State Minister, Vazha Lordkipanidze. The Abkhaz delegation was led by the de facto Prime Minister, Sergei Bagapsh. The Chief Military Observer of UNOMIG, the Assistant United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the United Nations Resident Coordinator in Georgia also attended and addressed the meeting.

9. The agenda of the sixth session included the following three items: (a) issues related to the lasting non-resumption of hostilities and security issues; (b) refugees and internally displaced persons; and (c) economic and social problems. In the course of the session, the Abkhaz delegation stated that it had decided to start the process of the return of refugees to the Gali district on a unilateral basis and appealed to the United Nations, the Russian

Federation as facilitator, OSCE, the States belonging to the group of the Friends of the Secretary-General and the Georgian side to support that decision. The Georgian delegation characterized the Abkhaz statement as mere rhetoric, which did not create any basis for the process of repatriation of refugees and displaced persons. It stated further that such a process was not possible without proper mechanisms and guarantees and without the active participation of the Georgian side and the international community. In the course of the session the two sides decided, inter alia, to convene, in the Gali district, not later than 22 December 1998, an urgent meeting of representatives of the two sides in order to prevent the destabilization of the situation in the zone of conflict and to agree on measures aimed at implementing the bilateral agreements contained in the protocols signed on 25 May 1998 in Gagra and on 24 September 1998 in Sukhumi.

10. From 24 to 25 November 1998, the Chairman-in-Office of OSCE and Minister for Foreign Affairs of Poland, Bronislaw Geremek, paid a visit to Georgia, as a part of his trip to Transcaucasia, and discussed issues connected with the conflicts in the region with President Shevardnadze and other officials. The issue of regional conflicts, including the conflict in Abkhazia, Georgia, was also on the agenda of the meeting of the OSCE Ministerial Council held in Oslo on 2 and 3 December 1998. In their decision on Georgia, the Ministers stressed, inter alia, that the Geneva process was a leading framework for the peaceful settlement of the conflict in Abkhazia, Georgia, and underlined the primary responsibility of the United Nations for advancing that process. They also declared OSCE's readiness to assist the United Nations in its efforts.

11. The Georgian-Abkhaz peace process was also on the agenda of the Executive Secretary of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Boris Berezovski, during his visit to Tbilisi on 18 November 1998. The Executive Secretary was received by President Shevardnadze and met with my Special Representative.

12. On 3 November 1998, the Governments of the Russian Federation and of Georgia concluded two agreements on cooperation on border issues. These agreements provided, inter alia, for a phased transfer by the Russian border guards of property and duties to their Georgian counterparts. The agreements were criticized by the Abkhaz side.

13. On 15 November 1998, elections to local organs of self-governance (councils) were held in Georgia (with the exception of the territory controlled by the Abkhaz side, as well as certain areas in the Tskhinvali region). These were the first such elections since the country regained independence in 1991.

III. OPERATIONS OF THE UNITED NATIONS OBSERVER MISSION IN GEORGIA

14. Since I last reported to the Security Council on 29 October 1998 (S/1998/1012), there has been no structural change in the operations of UNOMIG. The concept of limited patrolling remains the basis of operations. Under that concept, patrols operate in pairs of mine-protected vehicles during daylight hours along roads connecting population centres or CIS peacekeeping force checkpoints. The CIS peacekeeping force maintains a quick-reaction force and

the UNOMIG helicopter stands by to assist in case of any emergency. Team bases remain closed and the control of operations has thus become more centralized. It will be recalled that, before the hostage taking incident of February 1998, most of the operational patrolling was conducted from the four team bases located at remote points within the Security Zone. The team bases afforded ready access to the population throughout the conflict zone and allowed close liaison with local civil and military authorities. Continued closure of the team bases has curtailed UNOMIG's ability to fully respond to the requirements of its mandate. However, despite these limitations, UNOMIG has been able to achieve a generally satisfactory patrol coverage of the conflict zone through combined ground and helicopter patrols, and is able to observe and verify the parties' compliance with the Moscow Agreement on a Ceasefire and Separation of Forces of 14 May 1994 (see S/1994/583, annex I) and the Gagra Protocol of 25 May 1998 (see S/1998/497, para. 4).

15. After some delay, the first consignment of five new ballistic-protected vehicles (RG-32 SCOUTS) arrived in Tbilisi on 20 November 1998 and are already being used for patrolling. Eight more vehicles were received on 30 December and will soon become operational after installation of essential communication and other equipment. The introduction of these vehicles will provide greater operational flexibility, which had been curtailed due to the limited number and ageing of the previous mine-protected fleet. Since mine laying continues, particularly in the Gali district, the arrival of additional vehicles will substantially enhance the security of UNOMIG personnel and their ability to reach the more remote locations.

16. The initial phase of the road resurfacing project involving the M-27 trunk road between the Gali Canal and the Inguri River, which had been contracted in August 1998, has now been completed. However, owing both to the poor quality of the work and to winter rains, parts of the road surface have already begun to deteriorate. Nevertheless, it is intended that the project to resurface other roads in the Gali district be continued as this will substantially add to the security of UNOMIG patrols against possible mine threats.

17. The helicopter assigned to UNOMIG in June 1998 provides an essential security back-up for the mission, in particular for medical evacuation. It is also used for supplementing ground patrols, aiding in investigations and allowing access to hard-to-reach areas such as the Kodori Valley. As noted in my previous report (S/1998/1012, para. 27), the addition of a second helicopter would significantly enhance the operational proficiency and security of UNOMIG and the possibility of acquiring one is under review.

18. In pursuance of a decision taken at the fifth session of the Coordinating Council in September 1998, a Joint Investigation Group was to have been set up to investigate violations of the 1994 Moscow Agreement. Despite the fact that an organizational structure was established, with substantial logistical support from UNOMIG, this mechanism has not been successful so far. However, UNOMIG patrols, assisted by military observers with legal expertise, who have recently arrived in the Mission, monitor the investigations carried out by the respective sides or by the CIS peacekeeping force, whenever possible through mutual arrangements. In the assessment of the Chief Military Observer, an effective Joint Investigation Group would be a useful mechanism to ascertain facts,

determine responsibility and discourage violations by the two sides. There is a need for both sides to display greater resolve and willingness to make this group functional and to provide it with legal and administrative backing.

19. The weekly quadripartite meetings were subject to a prolonged boycott of almost two months by the Abkhaz side as a protest against the abduction of Abkhaz militiamen and the failure of the troops of the Georgian Interior Ministry to withdraw from the Khurcha pocket. The Abkhaz side's return to the meetings following the sixth session of the Coordinating Council and the follow-up meeting of 21 December 1998 is part of a positive trend in the last few weeks. The quadripartite meetings, which bring together the two sides in the presence of the CIS peacekeeping force and UNOMIG commanders, have always served as a useful platform for resolving local issues of a military, humanitarian and administrative nature.

IV. COOPERATION BETWEEN THE UNITED NATIONS OBSERVER MISSION IN GEORGIA AND THE COLLECTIVE PEACEKEEPING FORCES OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF INDEPENDENT STATES

20. The working relationship with the CIS peacekeeping force has been good at all levels. Close liaison is being maintained through regular meetings and exchange of information. UNOMIG continues to rely on the CIS peacekeeping force for its security and the force remains on standby to respond in case of emergency. Regular exercises are conducted and procedures are coordinated in order to maintain a high degree of readiness.

21. The expiration of the mandate of the CIS peacekeeping force on 30 June 1998 has not affected its presence. The force continues to operate from static checkpoints, located mostly along the ceasefire line and to perform very limited mobile patrolling. UNOMIG continues to observe and report on the force's operations within the framework of the Moscow Agreement. Most of the CIS peacekeeping force was rotated during October and November 1998.

V. SITUATION ON THE GROUND

A. General

22. The situation in the conflict zone remains tense and unstable. There have been frequent exchanges of fire across the ceasefire line and, in addition to small arms, rocket and grenade launchers have at times been employed. Despite UNOMIG's best efforts to put an end to this trend, the incidents could not be checked completely. Terrorist and subversive activities continue, including the laying of mines, particularly in the lower Gali district. The primary targets of these activities have been the CIS peacekeeping force and the Abkhaz militia; however, there seem also to have been cases in which mines have been placed to disrupt civilian traffic. Firing at the CIS peacekeeping force and at Georgian and Abkhaz checkpoints has also continued. The Moscow Agreement is violated by the deployment of prohibited weapons, mine incidents and restrictions on the freedom of movement of UNOMIG. It is a disturbing trend that both parties' responses to UNOMIG's protests are at times casual. The Chief Military Observer

has assessed that there is a need to create greater awareness and understanding of the mandate and modus operandi of UNOMIG among the local commanders and troops on both sides.

B. Security and restricted weapons zones

23. In the Gali sector, the lower part of the area remained the focus of attention. The Abkhaz authorities there have not been able to stop the criminal and terrorist activities and continue to blame the Georgian side for aiding and abetting the groups committing them. During November and December 1998, 15 separate incidents of mine attacks, firing and ambushes led to casualties on all sides. Among the Abkhaz militia, five were killed and eight seriously injured; one soldier of the Georgian Interior Ministry was killed and one injured; and one CIS peacekeeping force soldier was killed and 15 were wounded. In addition, five civilians were killed and 13 were injured. These criminal and terrorist activities seriously impede the normalization of the situation in the region. They prompt reprisals from the Abkhaz side and curtail the operations of UNOMIG and the CIS peacekeeping force. Despite appeals by UNOMIG, there seems to have been no serious effort by the parties to bring an end to them. Given that patrol coverage by UNOMIG is limited, it is at times difficult to report accurately on developments in the conflict zone or to pre-empt hostile actions through timely intervention. In addition, the Abkhaz side accused the Georgian side of launching, on 25 December, an amphibious operation near the village of Primorsk. The Georgian side categorically denied these allegations and UNOMIG failed to find any evidence that could substantiate the Abkhaz claim. Fortunately this incident, apparently based on the dissemination of false information, did not deteriorate into hostilities.

24. It will be recalled that, in my last report (see S/1998/1012, para. 33), I mentioned the efforts being made by the Abkhaz side to encourage those inhabitants who had fled the Gali district in the wake of the May 1998 events to return to their homes. These appeals have been largely unsuccessful, primarily because potential returnees do not have confidence in the still inadequate security conditions in the district. The Abkhaz militia have failed to effectively check criminal acts such as robbery and kidnapping for ransom and have themselves been repeatedly accused by the population of abetting crime. UNOMIG will continue to encourage the efforts of the Gali local administration to redress this situation.

25. The situation in the Zugdidi sector generally remained calm but unstable. The Georgian Interior Ministry troops holding positions in the Khurcha and Gan Mukhuri pockets were not completely withdrawn nor their positions dismantled as had been agreed in the protocol signed in Sukhumi on 24 September 1998. During the reporting period, tensions on the ground mounted and came to a head in early December 1998. When the threat of an outbreak of hostilities seemed imminent, my Special Representative convened the sixth session of the Coordinating Council (see paras. 8 and 9 above), at which a follow-up meeting in the Gali region was agreed upon. Subsequently, delegations of the Georgian and the Abkhaz sides, headed by Mr. Lordkipanidze and Mr. Bagapsh, respectively, and including the leaders of their respective military, met in Gali on 21 December and adopted a protocol which provided for a number of measures aimed at defusing the tensions.

26. On 21 December 1998, one Georgian soldier was killed in an exchange of fire between a checkpoint of the CIS peacekeeping force and a position of the Georgian Interior Ministry troops. This incident adversely affected relations between the CIS peacekeeping force and Georgian Interior Ministry forces. Soon after the incident, tension increased further when, for the first time, a mine attack against a CIS peacekeeping force vehicle took place in territory controlled by the Georgian side.

27. Pursuant to the protocol agreed at the 21 December meeting in Gali, troops have been pulled back within the Khurcha pocket (although the positions have not been completely dismantled), an operational communications link between the commanders of the two sides in the area of Khurcha/Nabakevi has been established and the heads of administration of the Zugdidi and Gali districts have been connected by a direct telephone line. These measures have resulted in a calming of the atmosphere along the ceasefire line.

C. Kodori Valley

28. Patrolling in the Kodori Valley was resumed in August 1998, but has been hampered by the destruction of the bridge on the road leading to the valley. As a result, vehicular patrols can be conducted only up to the last CIS peacekeeping force checkpoint. At present, the longer route to the upper valley from the Zugdidi side cannot be used because the mountain pass is blocked by snow. Limited numbers of helicopter patrols - one or two per month - are being launched to visit the Georgian-controlled portion of the valley. As these are not considered adequate for effective observation and reporting, a proposal to reopen the team base is under review. UNOMIG is also consulting with the authorities about an early repair of the bridge. On the basis of UNOMIG's limited patrolling, the situation in the valley is assessed as generally calm and quiet.

VI. SECURITY ARRANGEMENTS

29. The security and safety of UNOMIG personnel are constantly under review both in the mission and at headquarters. There has been no incident of a serious nature against UNOMIG personnel during the period under review. While the situation in the security zone remains unstable, the steps taken by the parties pursuant to the 21 December meeting in Gali (see para. 25 above) demonstrate a measure of good will on their part in addressing UNOMIG's security concerns. The pull-back of the troops from the Khurcha pocket and the resulting improvement of the security situation in the region have reduced the risk that UNOMIG might be caught in the crossfire during incidents between the parties.

30. The parties have also taken steps against the targeting of UNOMIG personnel or assets for either political or criminal reasons. The UNOMIG headquarters in Sukhumi is under the protection of the "Presidential Guards", who are more disciplined than the Abkhaz militia formerly deployed there and the local law enforcement agencies in Abkhazia, Georgia, have responded whenever approached by UNOMIG for specific assistance. The Georgian Interior Ministry troops continue

to protect the Zugdidi sector headquarters and the new logistics base in Zugdidi.

31. The introduction of the ballistic-protected vehicles will definitely improve the security of UNOMIG personnel while on operational patrols. While not entirely satisfactory, the deployment of lightly armed international security staff has been welcomed in UNOMIG and is expected to impact positively on the internal security of the mission. It will be recalled that the adverse security environment prevailing at the time had necessitated the suspension of active operations by military observers in February 1998. With an overall improvement in the security environment expected as a result of the steps taken by UNOMIG, the possibility of reopening some team bases is currently under review.

32. While the measures taken by the parties, as well as the measures taken by UNOMIG itself, have created a noticeably better security environment, concerns do remain. The September 1998 bus incident remains unsolved and the culprits have not been apprehended. In addition, there is the danger that common criminality may further increase as a result of deteriorating economic conditions, as well as the drug abuse and alcoholism to which many have resorted.

VII. HUMANITARIAN SITUATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS

33. During the period under review, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Acción contra el Hambre (ACH), Médecins sans Frontières (MSF-France) and the Halo Trust continued their assistance to many of the most vulnerable civilians in Abkhazia, Georgia. However, in the Gali district, access to vulnerable people outside of Gali town continued to be impeded because of the mining of some roads and other activities which placed both beneficiaries and aid workers at risk. As a result, many vulnerable people still lack the material assistance they require for the winter months, as well as the protection assistance that could be afforded to them through humanitarian agencies. In the tense security context, aid agencies continue to appeal to the Government of Georgia and the Abkhaz authorities to provide them with full support to ensure that assistance reaches civilians in need.

34. As a result of the May 1998 events, when a majority of the people who had spontaneously returned to the Gali district again had to flee their homes, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) had to shift the focus of its operations to the Zugdidi side and all the agency's international staff temporarily vacated the Sukhumi office. Nonetheless, that office, which is now operated by local staff, continues to maintain a liaison function (see S/1998/1012, para. 19). The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs also relocated its base for coordination activities in western Georgia from Sukhumi to Zugdidi, from where it continues to operate. The World Food Programme (WFP) has extended its emergency food programme through March 1999 to provide wheat flour, vegetable oil and sugar to the most vulnerable internally displaced persons in the Zugdidi area. In October 1998, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), in cooperation with the Georgian Ministry of Education, provided school supplies and school

furniture to some of the formerly occupied schools. UNHCR has completed its emergency shelter rehabilitation programme as well as the "winterization" of communal centres in the Zugdidi area and is about to finalize a programme for the rehabilitation of school buildings which have housed internally displaced persons since the events of May 1998.

35. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and UNHCR continue to monitor the humanitarian consequences of the severe drought of last summer in western Georgia, as well as the spillover effects of the economic crisis in Russia (see S/1998/1012, para. 21). Moreover, as adolescents and young adults are increasingly turning to crime, drug abuse and violent behaviour owing to persistent isolation since the war of 1992-1993 and to steadily declining economic conditions in Abkhazia, Georgia, there is now a critical need for programmes which can provide psycho-social support to this population. The activities of the few programmes which currently address these needs should continue to be supported and expanded.

36. The Head of the United Nations Human Rights Office in Abkhazia, Georgia, relinquished his post at the end of November 1998 after completing his contract. Currently, the Office is staffed with one OSCE Human Rights Officer and, since the end of December, with one junior United Nations Human Rights Officer. Recently, the Office started implementing a technical assistance project which provides seminars in the field of human rights, delivery of specialized literature to libraries and translation of United Nations publications in the field of human rights.

VIII. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC ASPECTS

37. Since the issuance of my last report, turbulence in the international financial markets has affected the stability of the national currency, the lari. In September 1998, following the devaluation of the Russian rouble, speculative pressure started to build on the lari. At the beginning of December, the lari lost approximately 50 per cent of its value in relation to the United States dollar before regaining part of its losses during the second half of the month. In addition, exports to the Russian Federation, which represented almost 30 per cent of the total exports of Georgia, have almost completely ceased. With some 30 per cent of its foreign market thus inaccessible, the Georgian foreign trade balance has been severely affected. Furthermore, it is expected that the level of remittances to Georgia by Georgian citizens working in the Russian Federation will decrease, while Georgians owning businesses in that country will continue to withdraw dollars from Georgia to sustain their investment there. As a consequence, it is expected that pressure on the value of the lari will continue.

38. The single most important obstacle to Georgia's economic development continues to be the deficit of the country's balance of payments. This problem is the consequence of the low level of government revenues, which did not exceed 8.6 per cent of the gross national product in 1998. Inability to collect taxes and a high level of tax evasion are the main causes of this problem, which could compromise the future development of the country. As a consequence, during 1998, the Government was not able to meet already minimal social expenditure

targets nor to sustain a programme of public investments in areas of social interest. Efforts to improve the situation have not been successful.

39. Even though the above considerations reflect weaknesses in the social and economic structure of the country, overall economic results were positive. It is estimated that, for the second consecutive year, the economy will continue to recover at a rate of growth of above 10 per cent in relation to the previous year, while inflation is still very modest, around 7 per cent, the lowest level since independence. In order to sustain economic recovery and provide resources to improve living conditions and reduce poverty, the Government will have to concentrate its efforts in 1999 on fighting corruption in the public service and on improving tax collection to reduce the budget deficit. Progress on both fronts will enhance credibility in public administration and will provide the resources needed to sustain public expenditures.

IX. FINANCIAL ASPECTS

40. By its resolution 52/242 of 26 June 1998, the General Assembly appropriated an amount of $19,439,280 (gross), equivalent to $1,619,940 per month for UNOMIG for the period from 1 July 1998 to 30 June 1999. The assessment of these amounts is subject to the decision of the Security Council to extend the mandate of the Mission. In addition, I obtained a commitment authorization from the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions in the amount of $1.5 million for the strengthening of internal security of UNOMIG.

41. Should the Security Council decide to extend the mandate of UNOMIG beyond 31 January 1999, as recommended in paragraph 47 below, the cost of maintaining the Mission until 30 June 1999 would be limited to the above-mentioned resources. I shall report to the General Assembly on the additional requirements needed, if any, for the maintenance of the Mission beyond 30 June 1999.

42. As at 31 December 1998, unpaid assessed contributions to the UNOMIG Special Account amounted to $8.4 million. The total of outstanding assessed contributions for all peacekeeping operations at that date amounted to $1.6 billion.

X. OBSERVATIONS

43. The precarious situation on the ground over the last few months has made it abundantly clear that bilateral contacts between the Georgian and Abkhaz sides, whenever they can be held, help to prevent armed hostilities from breaking out. Bilateral talks also remain the most effective means of achieving political progress. I therefore, once again, urge both sides to seek and engage in dialogue and to expand their contacts at all levels.

44. In view of the stalled negotiations on the return of refugees and displaced persons to their homes in the region, I also appeal to both sides to treat the issue as a matter of utmost urgency. The issue of return is a strictly humanitarian question which should not be used as an instrument to advance

political causes. It should also be stressed once again that the return of refugees and displaced persons is a right which is imprescriptible (see S/1998/375, para. 45).

45. While the political process towards a settlement has been slow, and at times has seemed to be almost blocked, UNOMIG has continued to carry out its mandate, thus contributing to a lessening of tensions on the ground, preventing an exacerbation of potentially serious incidents and providing a climate in which substantive negotiations can take place on the political level. Although much remains to be done before the environment in which UNOMIG operates can be said to be satisfactory, the measures taken by the mission have resulted in a situation in which UNOMIG military observers have been able to conduct limited patrolling without serious security incidents during the last three months. Should this situation continue, and in view of the deployment of internationally recruited security personnel and the arrival of ballistic-protected vehicles, a return to the patrolling patterns in effect before February 1998 might reasonably be contemplated in the coming months. For this to happen, however, it is clear that the two sides in the conflict must take substantive and tangible measures to curb criminal and terrorist activities. I therefore once again urge the parties to live up to their responsibility to ensure the security and safety of UNOMIG and its personnel.

46. The recent intensification of activities related to the peace process, the establishment of mechanisms for negotiations and the implementation of UNOMIG's mandate, together with the exercise of local good offices, have highlighted the need for a strengthening of the civilian component of the Mission, particularly in the field of political and civil affairs and public information. Specifically, an additional capacity in the political field on the ground is needed to make even better use of the existing mechanisms, the Coordinating Council and the quadripartite meetings, which have proven their usefulness over the last months in preventing hostilities and defusing tensions. An additional modest civil affairs capacity would allow UNOMIG to maintain better liaison with the humanitarian agencies and non-governmental organizations. Public information activities are needed to promote a better understanding of UNOMIG's mandate and activities by the parties and within the population in the various sectors, as well as to provide impartial information for the better performance of the Mission and the advancement of the peace process. These requirements are currently under review.

47. Given that UNOMIG remains indispensable for maintaining a situation conducive to the search for a political settlement of the conflict, I recommend that the Security Council extend the mandate of the Mission for a further six months until 31 July 1999. I urge the parties to use this time for substantive negotiations towards a settlement.

48. I wish to take this opportunity to thank my Special Representative, Liviu Bota, the Chief Military Observer, Major General Tariq Waseem Ghazi, and all the civilian and military personnel of UNOMIG who continue to serve the cause of peace in difficult and sometimes dangerous conditions.

Annex

Composition of the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia as at 15 January 1999

Country	Military Observers
Albania	1
Austria	4
Bangladesh	8
Czech Republic	4
Denmark	5
Egypt	3
France	5
Germany	11
Greece	3
Hungary	5
Indonesia	4
Jordan	6
Pakistan	7
Poland	4
Republic of Korea	3
Russian Federation	3
Sweden	5
Switzerland	4
Turkey	5
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	7
United States of America	2
Uruguay	3
Total	102

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